Show – don't tell: Political rhetoric is increasingly anecdotal but not particularly artful

Anecdotes have become one of the most common rhetorical devices in political speeches and debates to prove the success of policies or to illustrate that a leader is 'down to earth'. **Judi Atkins** *and* **Alan Finlayson** *explain why our politicians are ignoring Shakespeare and Keats and instead turning to 'Holly from Southampton' to prove their virtues.*

In the first of the 2010 general election leaders' debates David Cameron caused some amusement when, in reference to immigration policy, he began to tell a story. 'I was in Plymouth recently', he told the audience, 'and a forty-year-old black man made the point to me. He said 'I came here when I was six, I've served in the Royal Navy for 30 years. I'm incredibly proud of my country. But I'm so ashamed that we've had this out-of-control system with people abusing it so badly'.

There are some odd things about this story: it feels forced; it fits the subject too well; and as a rule the Royal Navy does not recruit people at the age of ten. Newspapers subsequently reported that the man was 51 years old, had served in the Navy for six years, and was of the view that 'Britain needs immigrants'. Odder still is that he was not the only person to have a walk-on part in the debate. Cameron had also recently met a crime victim from Crosby, a drug addict from Witney and a man suffering from cancer of the kidney. Nick Clegg had been talking to a ward nurse in a short-staffed hospital and a burglary victim from London. Gordon Brown had met a trainee chef and received a letter from a recovered cancer patient.

Why did the party leaders tell these stories and quote these people? What were they trying to achieve? And what do these anecdotes tell us about our political culture?
Politicians are almost always making an argument of some kind. They want us to see things their way, to agree with their policy, to find them electable and they try to provide reasons for us to do so. But in public and especially political argument (where there is uncertainty, ambiguity and contestation) it is impossible to confine those reasons to the purest of logical expressions. Political actors must use argumentative shortcuts and shorthand. They must appeal to their audiences' everyday assumptions. They must use words and phrases that are vivid for people who are not politicians or political scientists.

The study of such reason-giving is the study of rhetoric. And with their stories of nurses and patients, chefs and drug addicts, the party leaders were employing what Aristotle (in his ancient book on rhetoric) called 'witnesses': anyone (or anything) we bring into our speech to support our claims; anyone whose thoughts might bring insight and whom we think our audience will take seriously. These witnesses were quoted in a way which made them part of an 'argument from authority' – one resting on the presumed standing of the one quoted (in the same way in which we have just based a claim on the venerability of Aristotle). Those quotations were parts of stories presented as examples of reality, invitations for the audience to conclude something about the successes or failures of policy. And because the stories were often about contact between citizen and party leader, they were also attempts to bolster the character or 'ethos' of that leader, evidence of their being 'in touch' and 'on our level'.

The use of such anecdotes in the leaders' debate is intriguing, but on its own not that interesting. However, our research shows that their use in political rhetoric has increased consistently and markedly over the last 20 years. We reviewed Liberal Democrat, Labour and Conservative leaders' speeches to their Party Conference and found that from very limited use before 1990, such anecdotes have become one of the most common rhetorical devices. There were just seven in all the speeches from 1990-94, 32 in the next five years, 48 from 2000-04, and 73 from 2005-09.

These stories take two main forms. Some are about the leaders themselves, their background and

formative experiences. They are attempts to prove the worthy character of the leader and, importantly, worthiness is associated with ordinariness rather than exceptional achievement. The second kind is the story about a 'real' person with whom the leader has had some contact. For example, in 2003, Tony Blair told the story of an elderly woman who had cared for her sick husband despite her own ill-health and then been placed on a year-long waiting list for an urgent operation. Thanks to Labour policy she had been given the choice to travel and have the operation quicker elsewhere. Blair reported that, 'after the operation she said: "I'd go to the ends of the earth to get my health back. It saved me six months of anxiety. Really I feel it saved my life"'. Here, the success of policy is proven, and the virtue of choice amplified, through citation of the authoritative testimony of an 'elderly woman' whose experience is used as an example illustrating the virtues of an entire policy.

In 2008 Cameron told a different story. Attacking Labour's NHS reforms he cited a letter from a constituent whose wife had died after contracting MRSA in hospital. Telling his audience that 'some of the incidents described are so dreadful, and so degrading, that I can't read you most of the letter' (the trope of praeteritio, emphasizing something by ostentatiously not mentioning it), Cameron reported that, having forwarded the letter to the Health Secretary, he received a formal reply outlining procedure for making a complaint against the hospital: 'A Healthcare Commission, a Health Service Ombudsman, a Patient Advice and Liaison Service, an Independent Complaints Advocacy Service. Four ways to make a complaint, but not one way for my constituent's wife to die with dignity'. Here again an 'ordinary' constituent was the authoritative witness, his testimony evidence for a critique of health policy, his words amplifying emotions and inviting audience identification.

The arguments and justifications politicians employ are formed out of a general set of shared (yet not uncontested) assumptions about what counts as a good argument and what are the kinds of things people will find convincing, vivid and emotive. The rise to prominence of anecdotes is indicative of a change in that 'rhetorical culture', in what politicians, their advisers and speechwriters, think is a good way to argue. The essential feature of that change is the transfer of authority from expert to 'everyday' experience, and the prominence not of deduction from abstract facts but of induction from everyday examples. In the past party leaders would quote The Times, government reports, other politicians, Shakespeare, Shelley and Keats. Today they quote 'Holly from Southampton' (that's Blair from 2003).

In the rarefied world of personnel management, it is fashionable to emphasise 'tacit' over expert knowledge and to promote 'storytelling' as a way of communicating collective purpose. Most importantly, anecdotes are indicative of a form of populism – an ideology for which 'the people' has a special authority that legitimates claims about the world and what is to be done with it. Through the anecdote party leaders try to incorporate into their arguments an authority they lack.

There may be nothing wrong with this. Political speeches are not academic papers. Democracy is about 'representation' and that must be symbolic as well as substantive. It is not foolish to judge a politician by the extent to which they understand and appreciate the ways in which most of us live. But the anecdotes are evidence of how politicians think this can be demonstrated, not of their actual success in doing so. They are part of the rhetorical culture of British politicians, not of the British people. Perhaps they tell us only that speechwriters learn about arguments from management consultants, talk-shows and tabloid 'human-interest' writing, rather than from actual 'ordinary' people.

In cinema screenwriting an oft-cited rule is 'show – don't tell'. If a character is angry, for instance, this should be demonstrated in their actions rather than announced. A movie in which characters say 'I am sad' or 'Now I am happy' is going to be a bad movie. Rhetoric is an essential part of politics. Without it there can be no civic debate or dispute. But it is also one that can be used more or less artfully. It would perhaps be better if our party leaders were able to show a little more and tell a little less.

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